

Improving Access to Telecommunications in South Africa



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Alan Martin

[Photo: Telecentre in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.]

Making a simple telephone call used to cost Arnold Yilani a lot of time and money.

Yilani's village of Ndevana in Eastern Cape Province, South Africa had no public telephone. To all someone, Yilani would take a 20 minute taxi ride to King William's Town. There, he could use a payphone — and hope the person he wished to reach was available. For Yilani, a student taking correspondence courses at a technical college in Johannesburg, contacting his lecturer to discuss difficulties with an assignment could turn into a day-long outing.

Pilot project

In March of 1998, Yilani's life got easier with the arrival of an experimental telecentre. This telecentre is part of a pilot project coordinated by the [Universal Service Agency](#) (USA), a national statutory body that promotes and monitors access to phone, fax, and computer services among disadvantaged and underserved communities. The USA is supported by two International Development Research Centre (IDRC) projects that aim to assess the impacts of telecentres on local communities, and evaluate their potential role in achieving universal access.

In 1984, Sir Donald Maitland, Chairman of the Independent Commission for Worldwide Telecommunications Development, identified the lack of basic telecommunications infrastructure as the "missing link" between developing and developed countries. Maitland pointed out that Tokyo had more telephones than the entire African continent. His observation was as true then as it is now. Even in South Africa, which has an overall 'teledensity' of 9.5 telephone lines per 100 people, the density in some rural areas and black townships is less than one, says [Ramateu Monyokolo](#), Manager of the USA's National Project Support and Partnership Department.

Information elite

According to [Peter Benjamin](#), a lecturer at the [University of the Witswatersrand](#) in Johannesburg, in many countries the development of a hi-tech computer society has led to the creation of an information elite and another form of deprivation for the poor. South Africa is starting to use telecentres to lessen the inequality. While financial constraints will prevent the installation of a phone line in every home for at least the next 30 years, the government hopes to provide access to telephones within five kilometres — or half an hour's walk — of every home, over the next decade.

Most of the USA's financing comes from a 20 million rand fund set up following the privatization of Telkom, the formerly state-owned monopoly. This fund is supplemented by a tax on cellular telephone companies and support from organizations like IDRC. By June 1998, six telecentres had opened across the country, and the USA expects to have 500 in operation by the end of 2002, when its mandate expires.

Toward universal access

"Four thousand telecentres are needed to make universal access a reality," says Benjamin, who has also worked as a consultant for the USA. "But if we piggyback the telecentres on existing churches, clinics, schools, and community centres, we might get close."

Before opening a telecentre, the USA considers such criteria as the needs of a community and the long-term prospects for economic sustainability. After approving a location, the Agency helps set up a consortium of community groups, which has a financial stake in the centre's operation. After an initial two year period, the consortium is given full responsibility for the centre. Each month, the USA monitors its growing network of telecentres for signs of success that can be incorporated into future centres.

Development tool

According to Monyokolo, a telecentre is both a means of communicating with family and friends and a tool for education and development. The ultimate aim is to give communities the skills, information, and links they need — including access to political representatives — to uplift people's lives and make them better informed citizens, he says.

Bukelwa Gidi has visited the centre serving Ndevana almost every day since it opened. Like most people, she comes mainly to use the telephone. But the 21-year old also uses one of its four computers to send résumés which, she hopes, will help her land a job in South Africa's second-poorest province. Once a teacher is found, students from the nearby high school will be brought to the centre to learn how to type and use the Internet.

Precondition of development

The telecentre concept is strongly supported by Jay Naidoo, South Africa's Minister for Post, Telecommunications and Broadcasting. "In the Global Information Society, there is a direct positive correlation between access to telecommunications and socioeconomic development," Naidoo told the Africa Telecom Conference held in Johannesburg in May 1998. "We realize that telecommunications is no longer the consequence of development, rather it is a necessary precondition."

Alan Martin is a Canadian journalist who is reporting from South Africa on an IDRC-supported Gemini News Service fellowship. (Photo: A. Martin)

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